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ABSTRACT

In the 1988-89 school year, a teacher introduced whole language learning to teach reading and writing in her classroom while documenting and then evaluating its effect on a 12-year-old special needs student named Debbie. According to formal testing, Debbie was functioning in the moderately handicapped range of ability, and her speech and language skills were commensurate with her ability. Debbie participated in a variety of reading and writing activities throughout the year, including: individual reading class, group reading activities, independent reading, group writing activities, independent writing, group spelling class and four thematic units of study. Four data collection procedures were used to document changes in Debbie's reading and writing over the school year: 2 reading miscue inventories, 14 running records of her reading, samples of Debbie's writing throughout the year, and a retelling of stories before and after the thematic unit. Comparative results indicated that Debbie did change and grow as a reader and writer, a fact that clearly demonstrated the effectiveness of whole language learning to promote language learning and literacy growth of special needs students. (MG)

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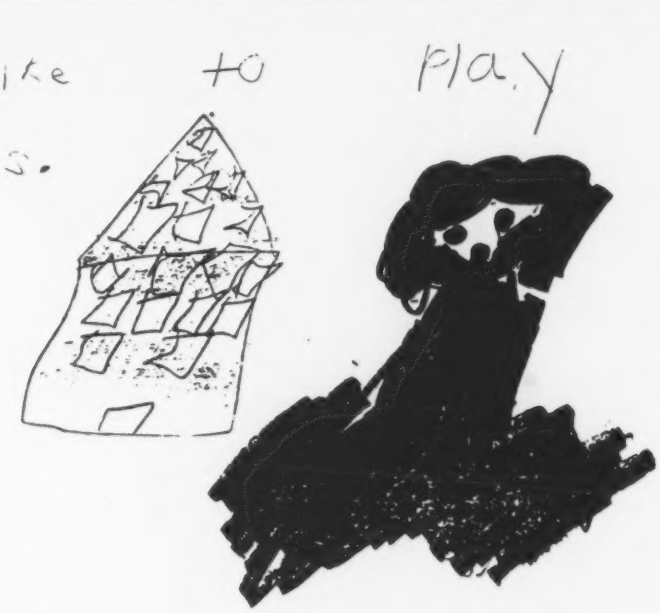

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by

Barbara Hinnenkamp

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INSIGHTS into open education

Reading and Writing With a Special Needs Student: A Case Study

by

Barbara Hinnenkamp
Grand Forks, ND

I have been a teacher of special needs students for eighteen years. My educational training included use of diagnosis of the learning problem, task analysis, behavioral objectives, remediation of weaknesses, skill sequences, and individualized instruction. Although my teaching has never been a strict behavioral approach with charting, graphs and percentages, it has been a skills-based approach with students receiving much individualized instruction. Over the years, however, I became more and more dissatisfied with my reading and writing program.

My concerns focused on the difficulty my students had transferring and applying the skills they studied. They displayed little growth in their ability to use reading and writing in a functional and purposeful way. They were not assuming more responsibility for their own learning.

My search for something to address my concerns led me to whole language learning. Whole language learning, with its focus on keeping language whole, on promoting child centered learning, on developing uses of language in a natural environment, and on giving children ownership of their learning, appeared to me to be an important teaching approach. Learning is not broken down into bits and pieces which must then be integrated back into a whole. Various areas and avenues of learning are not separated from each other but remain integrated. What each child does when he/she reads and writes is the basis for classroom curriculum, not a sequence of skills. Responsibility of the learning process remains with the child so he/she is not instructionally dependent on the teacher.

Whole language learning addressed my concerns and appeared to me to be a teaching approach to be tried, examined, and evaluated in my classroom.

In the 1988-89 school year I introduced whole language learning to teach reading and writing in my classroom while documenting and then evaluating its effect on one of my special needs students. The student, Debbie (not her real name), was twelve years old at the time of this case study. According to formal testing, she was functioning in the moderately handicapped range of ability and her speech/language skills were commensurate with her ability. She was a beginning reader and writer. I followed Debbie's development in reading and writing from September 1988, through May 1989.

Activities

Debbie participated in a variety of reading and writing activities throughout the year. She participated in an individual reading class, group reading activities, independent reading, group writing activities, independent writing, group spelling class, and four thematic units of study.

In Debbie's individual reading class, daily instruction was one-to-one using shared book reading and guided reading (Holdaway, 1979). During shared book reading, I read a book to Debbie and she made predictions as I

read. During guided reading, Debbie read a book and I supported her use of language cueing systems and reading strategies. Trade books were primarily used. However, stories from the appropriate level basal texts were also read. I focused on developing Debbie's predicting strategy, her becoming more and more aware when her reading did not make sense or sound like language, and her use of self-correction and reading for more information. Over the course of the school year, Debbie read approximately 50 trade books and 22 stories from preprimer basal readers.

In group reading activities, Debbie participated with a small group in shared-book experiences using predictable big books (Holdaway, 1979). Each big book was read and worked with by masking, taking turns pointing while the group read, and discussing the pictures and text. Each big book was worked with for approximately two days, and then the class read the small multiple copies of the book. In addition, trade books were read and discussed. Non-fiction, informational books were read and the information charted. Poems, chants, and short songs were read and reread. They all were used to extend the story or a topic being studied.

My focus was to develop predicting skills, to build background experiences in book language and purposes for reading, to develop the concept of what a word is and to enable each group member to see him/herself as one who reads. Over the course of the school year, Debbie participated in reading 16 big books and 13 poems, chants, and short songs.

During independent reading, Debbie used a carpeted reading area to read material of her choice. The selection of books included those we had read in group reading, those she had read during individual reading class, those the class had written, and those with which she was not familiar. The walls around the reading corner contained poems, chants, short songs, and stories the group had read and/or written and were also available for her to read. A record was not kept of what Debbie read during her independent reading time, but it gave her an opportunity to use, explore, and expand her independent use of the language cueing systems and the opportunity to choose what she would like to read for her own purposes.

In group writing activities, Debbie participated with a small group of students in completing sentence frames such as "I see ___" or "I like _____," and in adapting the structural pattern from a book or poem such as *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* by Bill Martin, Jr. (1970). Students also wrote group reports, original narratives, and dictated retellings of stories. My focus was to build background experiences in different styles of writing for different purposes, to develop an awareness that a writer can construct meaning with his/her own words, and to enable each group member to see him/herself as one who writes. Over the course of the school year, Debbie participated in group writing (and usually the illustrating) of 16 different texts.

During independent writing, Debbie and the other students had a writing folder containing their writing. Each day they got their folder and continued their writing from one day to the next. The students chose their own topics. After their writing piece was complete, they spent time illustrating their books and stories, and time was given to share their stories. My focus was to give students time to explore their use of writing for their own purposes, and to enable them to realize that writing about their thoughts and ideas is worthwhile. Over the course of the school year, Debbie wrote approximately 15 different texts during her writing time.

During the year, Debbie participated with a small group of students studying four thematic units. The topics were "spiders," "fairy tales," "dogs," and "cats." During the units of spiders, dogs and cats, informational books were read and discussed. Before, during and after reading, information the students and I gained was charted and categorized. The units included poems, chants, short songs, and a variety of other activities. Each ended with a written report about the unit theme. During the fairy tale unit, I read a number of fairy tales to the group. Over the course of reading and discussing the stories, we compiled a simple feature chart of what makes a story a fairy tale. The unit activities included sequencing pre-written events of one fairy tale into a book and then illustrating the tale, sequencing pictures from one fairy tale and then dictating a retelling of the tale, acting out each fairy tale as it was read and ending with dictating an original fairy tale. During the thematic units, Debbie participated in reading 20 books and in writing seven different texts in both group and individual activities.

From November 1988, through the end of the school year, Debbie participated in a small group spelling class using *Spelling Through Phonics* by Marlene and Robert McCracken. It is a spelling program that emphasizes listening to sounds within a dictated word and writing the sounds heard in their proper sequence. The program also stresses that word(s) to be spelled be said only once by the teacher so that students learn to spell their own speech. Listening for the position of sounds (beginning, middle, end) and spelling dictated words and sentences were worked on daily. My purpose for using this program with Debbie and the other students was to help them apply phonics when attempting to spell an unknown word, and then to transfer this to their writing in the form of invented spelling.

Data Collection Procedures

Four data collection procedures were used to document changes in Debbie's reading and writing over the school year.

1. Two Reading Miscue Inventories were given. The Reading Miscue Inventory (RMI) is used to assess a student's reading (Goodman, Watson, & Burke, 1987). It is given individually and requires the student to orally read a book or passage at his/her approximate reading level. After reading, the student retells what the text concerns and then responds to open-ended questions asked by the teacher. After the student's reading and retelling, the teacher completes an analysis of the miscues the student made during the reading and evaluates the student's retelling of the text. A manual outlines the procedures for coding, scoring, and analyzing a student's miscues and evaluating his/her retelling.

The miscue analysis helps the teacher gain insight into the student's reading process. It provides a view of the knowledge a student brings to his/her reading and the strategies he/she uses to construct meaning from reading. The retelling evaluation allows the teacher to gain insights into the student's understanding of the text.

Debbie was given the Reading Miscue Inventory, Procedure I, during the first week of school and again during the last week of school. For evaluation the analysis of Debbie's miscues in September was compared to the analysis of her miscues in the May RMI.

2. Fourteen running records of her reading were kept—seven on books with which she was familiar and seven on books with which she was not familiar. A running record is used as a progress check of a student's reading fluency and to determine what degree of support is still needed (Clay, 1985). Reading

fluency is how effectively a student is using language cueing systems and reading strategies when he/she reads. The degree of support is how much teacher guidance is needed when reading and/or the level of predictability in reading text the student still requires.

The text is read orally while the teacher checks at a word level whether or not the student read it correctly. The text and miscues are scored by

a) Total number of words
b) Number of words read correctly
c) Number of miscues
d) Number of self-corrections
e) Percent of words read correctly.

To further evaluate Debbie's growth in reading, the September and May running records of Debbie reading the unfamiliar text were compared.

3. Samples of Debbie's writing were kept throughout the year, and the samples were then compared with each other across time. For example, Figure 1, a sample of her beginning writing, was compared to Figure 2, a sample of her writing at mid-year, and both were compared to Figure 3, a sample of her writing near the end of the year. The areas of comparison across her writing were graphophonic usage for spelling and usage of writing conventions (capitalization, use of complete sentences, punctuation, spaces between words).

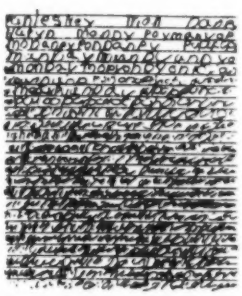

Figure 1. Sample of beginning writing.

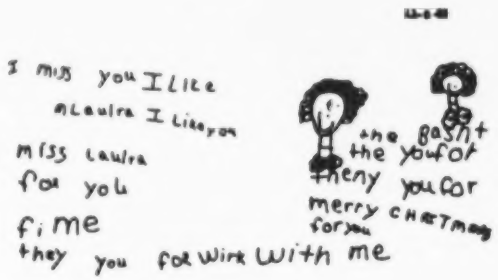

Figure 2. Sample of thank you note.

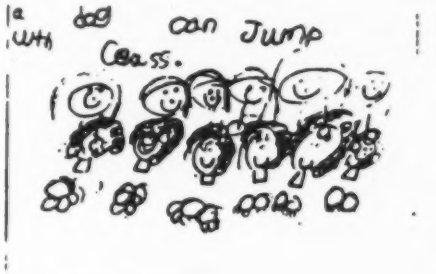

Figure 3. Sample of April writing.

4. A retelling was used before the unit began and again after the unit concluded. The thematic unit on dogs was used. Each time Debbie was read the same nonfiction, informational book about dogs, and asked to retell what the book was about. Her "before the unit" retelling was compared to her "after the unit" retelling for the purpose of determining if the use of thematic units for teaching information and expanding subject vocabulary is an effective instructional activity. The areas of comparison in the retellings were points of information within each retelling and her vocabulary usage.

Results

The comparative results of these procedures indicate Debbie did change and grow as a reader and writer (Hinnenkamp, 1989).

Debbie's growth as a reader displayed itself in improved reading fluency, in her ability to process more visual information, in her ability to gain meaning from her reading, in more effective use of syntactic, semantic, and graphophonic cueing systems, in an increase in the length of texts she read, in her making higher quality miscues, and in her increased use of self-correction. Debbie's growth as a writer displayed itself in her considerable movement towardconventional writing in terms of using real words, correct sentence structure, spacing between words, conventionally spelled words in conjunction with more accuracy in invented spelling, and in the use of periods at the end of sentences. The comparative results also indicate that thematic units of study are an effective instructional activity to teach information and expand vocabulary, as evidenced by an excellent increase in points of information and vocabulary usage with her "after the unit" retelling.

Conclusions

Debbie's growth in reading and writing when using a whole language curriculum clearly demonstrated to me the effectiveness of whole language learning to promote language learning and literacy growth of special needs students. Whole language learning addressed and resolved my concerns of my students being able to transfer and apply their skills, use their skills in a functional and purposeful way, and assume more responsibility for their own learning.

The implications of this case study, demonstrating the effectiveness of whole language learning, are significant for special education instruction and special educators. If we want our students to be able to generalize and use their skills in a variety of situations for a variety of purposes, they need to learn those skills as part of an integrated and natural environment. We must reflect on and evaluate practices which divide and subdivide learning into a sequence of skills written as behavioral objectives to be mastered, practices designed to remediate weaknesses in which the teacher sets the curriculum to be followed, practices where the products of learning are the focus of instruction resulting in "can do" and "cannot do" evaluation of performance, practices which individualize instruction to the point that each student may be the only one working on a particular task and alone in their learning.

There is much for special education and special educators to consider, focused on two basic questions: "What do we really want our classrooms to be?" and "What type of readers, writers and life-long learners do we really want our students to become?"

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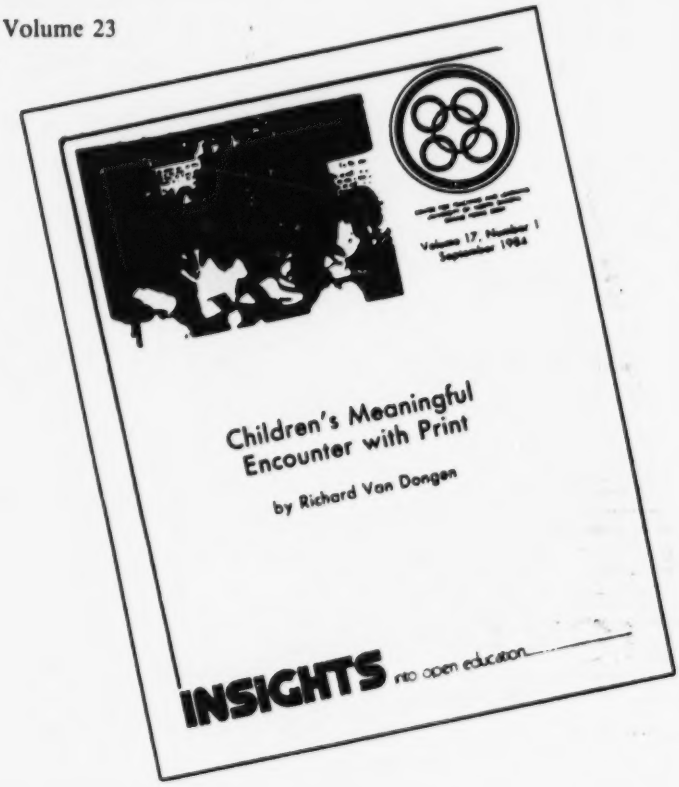

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